

Upscale Fla. town in fight over immigrant prison

November 19, 2011 — SOUTHWEST RANCHES, Fla. (AP) — In one of South Florida's upscale, rural enclaves, where peacocks roam and horse trails are as common as sidewalks, town leaders decided to bring in much of their money from an unusual business: a prison.

Only the leaders of Southwest Ranches kept their plans quiet from residents for almost a decade, and the project has now ballooned into what would be among the federal government's largest immigrant detention centers. Many residents finally caught wind of the idea this year, when U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement announced a tentative deal, and they're angry. They've held protests at public meetings, contemplated whether to recall the mayor before his March election and whether to amend the town charter to make it easier to fire the city attorney pushing the deal.

The objection over the prison has created an odd set of allies among the town's affluent residents, many of whom are wary of illegal immigrants, and longtime activists who fight for immigrants, legal or not.

The proposed facility is part of the federal government's new plan to move immigrants from jails to detention centers it says are better for holding people with no criminal background. The centers are also supposed to be easier to reach for detainees' relatives and lawyers.

Plans are in the works for other facilities near San Antonio, Texas, and in Essex County, N.J. and Orange County, Calif. But none of those proposals has drawn the outrage seen in Southwest Ranches, the Fort Lauderdale suburb home to wealthy developers, Miami Dolphins football players and others seeking a luxurious, yet rural lifestyle.

Diana Bramhall is one of 7,000 people living in the town. She trains horses and grows an array of exotic avocados at her Southwest Ranches home, where she has lived for 18 years. She hadn't heard of the prison plan until last year.

"I don't want my town built on the back of the detention of illegal immigrants," Bramhall said. "I think there are better ways to make money." But according to Mayor Jeff Nelson and others involved at the time, the plan for some kind of prison run by Corrections Corporation of America, the nation's largest private prison operator, was always integral to Southwest Ranches' ability to survive.

Nelson believes the plan has been out in the open, and officials list more than two dozen public meetings over the last decade where it was discussed. But residents insist the town did little to notify them.

An announcement for a Nov. 5 meeting about the detention center with ICE, CCA and Southwest Ranches officials was listed on the town website only as an "information meeting." When the town incorporated in 2000, leaders annexed a 24-acre parcel of nearby land, sandwiched between a small women's prison and a dump. CCA had purchased the land just three years before. It was a curious move. The land wasn't connected by a road to the rest of the town. Many residents never even drove by it.

The town first tried to build a 700-bed county jail. By 2005, Southwest Ranches and CCA settled on a detention facility. The proposal was part of a growing trend among private prison contractors to move away from state and local facilities to federal ones. ICE facilities alone now provide about 12 percent, or nearly \$200 million of CCA's total annual revenue, according to company filings.

Southwest Ranches and CCA sent a draft plan to ICE for review in 2007, two years before the agency officially put out its latest call for new proposals, according to records obtained by The Associated Press through a public information request.

In the latest version of the deal, calling for some 1,500 beds, Southwest Ranches could earn more than \$1.5 million annually if ICE keeps the center

filled year round. CCA officials say the number is closer to \$400,000, in part because many beds may not always be filled, with another \$400,000 in real estate taxes.

The 13-square mile town, which prides itself on low taxes, needs the revenue, recently telling the federal government it was struggling to meet its \$9 million budget. "We'll get a commission on every bed, I get that," said Bramhall. "But it bothers me that for my city, (such a large section) is now going to be from a jail. It's not really a selling point."

Job creation has been a selling point for CCA, local and federal officials. "Beyond the detention professionals, you're also looking at a number of other professions: medical professionals, training professionals, food services professionals, chaplains. It's like a small city unto itself," CCA spokesman Steve Owen said.

Yet nearly two-thirds of the estimated 300 permanent jobs would be for guards. "No one is going to want a job there. These are half million homes. People here earn \$100,000 plus," said Ryan Greenberg, whose home in the neighboring city of Pembroke Pines sits across the road from the proposed site — closer than any home in Southwest Ranches itself.

At the Nov. 5 meeting with officials, residents echoed her sentiments. "We don't want your jobs!" they bellowed. What they did want was to know why their own officials had been dodging them. The CCA land wasn't included in maps published when the city was founded and the full city charter with the CCA lots isn't available on the city's website. It can only be found in the original resolution passed by state lawmakers in Tallahassee.

In January, days after the new year, town officials and CCA quietly sought to double the detention center space and expand to up to 2,200 beds with little public notice, eventually abandoning the plan following an outcry.

Southwest Ranches' City Attorney Keith Poliakoff urged officials in a June email to keep a "cone of silence" following ICE's announcement about the tentative deal. "I have been fully advised by our DC contacts that we should remain fully quiet on this one and to let our DC Leaders help without sparking a fire that will make it more difficult for them to assist," wrote Poliakoff, also a partner in one of the state's most powerful lobbying firms.

Top Florida lawmakers in Washington like Democratic National Chairwoman Debbie Wasserman-Shultz and U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson have supported the project while publicly keeping their distance. According to town and CCA emails, Republican U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio asked to attend a D.C. meeting on the plan, but CCA demurred, saying it would bring too much attention. Rubio has not taken a position the proposal.

Meanwhile, neighboring officials from Pembroke Pines have publicly expressed outrage over the secretive process while quietly signing deals with the town promising not to interfere. Residents say they are waiting to see the final deal. They have successfully fought off far smaller development efforts, including plans for streetlamps and a toddler playground. They once even tried to pay another town to construct affordable housing before the state relaxed its requirements.

The Florida Immigrant Coalition recently demanded ICE halt plans until an environmental review is done on the impact of the nearby Everglades. The alliance between the residents and activists has not been without tension. At the meeting with ICE officials, an activist who broached the subject of detainee treatment in private prisons was roundly booed.

But Southwest Ranches resident Bill Di Scipio said those who advocate for immigrant rights and those in the community who want more people deported, are united in on this one. "In the opposition to the prison, both sides of the immigration debate are represented," he said.